

# Korsch's 'Road to Marx'

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The two men who initiated what came to be called Western Marxism were both bankers' sons. It is a nice coincidence, but it entails a contrast by way of reminder, that Georg Lukacs' and Karl Korsch's closely linked reconstructions of Marxian theory in the early 1920s were far from identical. Jozsef von Lukacs, father of the author of *History and Class Consciousness*, was the managing director of the Budapest Kreditanstalt, Hungary's largest bank, and thus a member of Central Europe's financial aristocracy. He had received the noble title - the 'von' in German - in recognition of his services to the Austro-Hungarian crown. His son, on becoming a communist in 1919, would drop the 'von' from his name, but would produce a Marxian theory with a grandeur and bold sweep befitting his social roots. In contrast, Korsch's father, who came from a family of small farmers, rose quietly through the ranks of provincial German civil service to an officership in a Thuringian branch bank. In the very best of his times, he was a man of modest means. When his son became a Marxist in 1920, frugality and an emphasis on the practical would characterize his theoretical labors.<sup>1</sup>

Other contrasts within similarities to Lukacs will be touched on in the following pages which, however, have a more specific and limited aim: namely, tracing the development of Karl Korsch's work up to 1918. Recent research has begun to delineate the differences between the fraternal texts, *History and Class Consciousness* and *Marxism and Philosophy*, and between their authors' subsequent careers.<sup>2</sup> So, for example, it is reasonably well established that, while Lukacs and Korsch both retrieved the Hegelian aspect of Marx's thought, and agreed that this was central to the revolutionary content of Marxism, only Lukacs glimpsed the dialectic of alienation. And as to their political careers, it is perfectly clear at least that, whereas Lukacs made his strange peace with Stalinism by the late 1920s, Korsch took up the cudgels of anti-Stalinism, soon turning them on Leninism as well.

While not pursuing these important theoretical and political themes, the present essay may help to illuminate them in so far as Korsch's positions from 1918 onward have part of their source in the preceding phases of his career. This goes without saying, yet by comparison to the extensive attention that has been paid to the "young

Lukacs," Korsch's early period - his "road to Marx" - has virtually been ignored. <sup>3</sup> In fact, this is hardly surprising. For one thing, Korsch's *oeuvre* prior to his becoming a Marxist in 1920 is simply not that rich a lode, neither quantitatively nor qualitatively. It contains some two dozen essays of political and cultural commentary and an academic press publication of Korsch's dissertation in jurisprudence: in other words, nothing of depth and intensity comparable to Lukacs' early *Soul and Forms* or *Theory of the Novel*, which are significant works quite apart from their place in their author's subsequent development.

For another thing, Korsch as a young man was already a socialist and a democrat, and, as will be shown shortly, his transition to Marxism and communism in 1920 was more logical than Lukacs' conversion, and thus attracted less attention, then and later. Furthermore in this connection, the later Korsch wrote next to nothing in the way of retrospective analysis of his own early work, characteristically moving with little fanfare through the several phases of his career as a Marxist. Lukacs, on the other hand, emerged as the most active critic of the "young Lukacs," producing not a few works aimed at correcting what he came to view as his early heresies. Subsequent commentators have in the main followed these leads - not mistakenly, but with the result that rather little light has been shed on the "young Korsch". The list of reasons for this incomplete picture can be extended, but it will be more useful to turn directly to trying to fill in at least some of the blank spots. <sup>4</sup>

### **Student Years: A Rationalist Radical amidst Romantic Revolt**

In 1924 at the Fifth World Congress of the Communist International, Korsch, Lukacs and others came under attack from the leadership for their alleged ultra-leftism and philosophical revisionism. In the course of his denunciation, Zinoviev labeled them "Professors" - a demagogic remark which, however, was partially true: Korsch, at least, was a professor of law at the Jena University, a position he had gotten the preceding year and would retain, often with difficulty, until the eve of the Nazi takeover. In fact, the background against which Korsch's figure first comes into focus is an academic one: the same Jena University, from which he earned his doctorate of jurisprudence *summa cum laude* in 1910 with a dissertation, "The Burden of Proof in Cases of Qualified Confession: A Contribution to Theories of Law and Behavior." <sup>6</sup> He was twenty-four years old.

Already a socialist, Korsch had no political party affiliations, specifically no ties to the youth and student sections of the Social Democratic Party of Germany. Prior to and during his studies at Jena (he had attended the Munich, Berlin and Geneva universities, concentrating on philosophy and history), he was, however, active in the *Freier Studenten*, the Free Student movement, which opposed both the nationalistic

fraternities and the authoritarianism of the German school system. Among other things, he worked toward the establishment of programs of free legal assistance for the poor, and in general sought to bring the *Freier Studenten* into contact with working class groups. Unsuccessful efforts, these are nevertheless indicative of the democratic and egalitarian values which were the initial and sustaining heart of Korsch's outlook.<sup>7</sup> At one of the talks he often presented on behalf of *Freier Studenten* causes, he met Hedda Gagliardi in 1908, and five years later they were married. In Germany in the 1920s and then during their American emigration, Hedda Korsch emerged as a significant figure in her own right in the area of child development and education. The two were *compagnons de route* until Karl Korsch's death in Belmont, Massachusetts in 1961.<sup>8</sup>

Notably, Korsch stood apart from the more effusively romantic tendencies of the student and youth movements of pre-war Germany. Not unlike some recent developments in the United States, the cultural crisis of Wilhelmine Germany unleashed numerous cults of youth as the embodiment of eros, spontaneity, authenticity and community in the face of a sclerotic bourgeois civilization. The hikers of the *Wandervogel*, the Free School Communities initiated by Gustav Wyneken, and such novels as Hermann Hesse's *Demian* and Robert Musil's *Young Torless* are among the better-known expression of these efforts. While Korsch shared many of their criticisms of the established order, his distinctly neo-Enlightenment cast of mind was foreign to the neo-Romantic youth metaphysics. Celebrating the Idea of Youth was in his view a sign of the movement's inability to engage in a public discourse "beyond its own narrow circles."<sup>9</sup>

Here we already glimpse what would prove to be characteristically Korschian motifs: the practical thrust of his thinking and his hostility to hermetic theorizing. Moreover, his interest in the young generation was not a passing fancy confined to his own student years, but a more enduring interest based on the idea that the young are, indeed, less fettered than the old by the existing institutions and patterns. This is, of course, an Enlightenment as well as a Romantic notion, and Korsch would return to it numerous times in his career. In this connection, decades later, Bertolt Brecht, by then a close friend, would remark that Korsch "firmly believes in the new. Thus he loves the youth, who for me are only immature."<sup>10</sup> Brecht, as is well-known, was something of an expert on immaturity.

### **The Fabian Years: Activist Gradualism versus Passive Marxism**

The most important and interesting phase of Korsch's pre-Marxian work is his association in London with the Fabian Society. Late in 1911 the Jena law faculty provided him with a stipend for a trip to study English law and to translate certain

texts into German.<sup>11</sup> He would remain until the outbreak of World War One. In view of his intellectual and political orientation, it is not surprising that once in the London area, Korsch was soon in touch with the Fabians. He thus became one of a small but significant number of German socialists - Eduard Bernstein being the best-known - who "during their sojourn in England imbibed Fabianism and spread it in Germany."<sup>12</sup>

A Korsch-Bernstein comparison is useful here. The latter had gone to England in the early 1890s as a Marxist and member of the working class Social Democratic Party of Germany. Initially, he eschewed contact with the Fabian Society because of its middle-class character, its reputation as a parlor-socialist clique, and the already infamous narcissism of some of its leading members.<sup>13</sup> This hostility was not long in dissolving, however, and Bernstein's subsequently close association with Fabianism was a strong ingredient in his positivist and gradualist revisions of Marxism. Korsch, on the other hand, an independent socialist intellectual - and not a Marxist - was immediately attracted to the Fabian ambience. In it he found what he had been pressing toward on his own: a non-dogmatic and vigorously practical approach to socialist reform centering around a program of public education and enlightenment.

The main point in this connection, however, is that Korsch and Bernstein drew a common shoot from Fabianism, but nurtured it differently: the activism and philosophically eclectic anti-determinism of the Fabian perspective. In Bernstein's hands this blossomed into a rejection of the Marxian theories of crisis and revolution, and an affirmation of piecemeal evolution toward socialism. For Korsch, in contrast, it would serve as the beginning of his later revitalization of the "subjective factor" within Marxism.

A clue to the meaning of Korsch's stay in England appears in the contrasting titles of the German journals in which he published - as far as I know, he did not publish anything in English at the time. His several earliest essays (1911-1912) were published in a small periodical devoted to university affairs, *Akademische Rundschau* (Academic Review).<sup>14</sup> Beginning with his arrival in London and extending through the war years into early 1919, by which time he had returned to Germany, virtually all of Korsch's essays were published in the widely-read journal of culture and "cultural politics:" *Die Tat* (Action, or The Deed). The shift reflected here - from academia to action - is not to be taken literally, but as indicative of the direction in which Korsch sought to move.

His association with *Die Tat* is intriguing. It began almost accidentally when, just prior to his departure for England, Korsch met Eugen Diederichs, the journal's editor and publisher, who paid well for articles and invited Korsch to submit commentaries on the English scene. *Die Tat* did, however, have close ties to the student and youth movements whose theorists, among them, Hans Bliher, Gustav Wyneken, the young

Alfred Kurella and even Walter Benjamin, contributed to its pages. Presumably, Diederichs knew of Korsch's work with the *Freier Studenten*. On the other hand, the latter was something of a dark sheep in this company, for *Die Tat* was also a leading organ of neo-romantic cultural politics, often of its more irrationalist expressions. Diederichs, who as editor did open his pages to a wider range of opinion, nevertheless "considered himself the leading publisher of the New Romanticism, which he traced back to Nietzsche and [Paul] Lagarde."<sup>15</sup> As we shall see momentarily, Korsch's articles would be poles apart from the anti-scientific, anti-rationalist and anti-industrial thrust of the journal as a whole.

There is, on the other hand, another current in which Korsch and *Die Tat* stood together: namely, what the German philosopher, Theodor Lessing, in 1908 called "this new cultural movement - Activism [*Aktivismus*]."<sup>16</sup> A broad, European-wide intellectual development that emerged around the turn of the century. Activism traversed an otherwise dissonant series of philosophical, artistic and political tendencies: Expressionism, neo-Hegelianism, Philosophy of Life, Cubism, Lenin's voluntaristic theory of the vanguard party, Georges Sorel's notion of *action directe* among others. Activism's driving and unifying theme was its assertion of the creative powers of human subjectivity (consciousness, will, imagination) against a world whose objectivity and materiality appeared increasingly impenetrable and intractable.

*Die Tat* was part of this overall Activist current. Notably, a spate of publications bearing similar titles appeared in Germany during the pre-war years: *Die Aktion*; *Erhebung* (Rebellion); *Der Anhang* (The Beginning); *Der Aufbruch* (The Uprising) - all expressions of cultural rather than directly political criticism and revolt, but as such signaling the emergence of a new generation of anti-bourgeois bourgeois intellectuals. These titles and themes, however, referred not only to the will to action, uprisings, and new beginnings but simultaneously to the crisis of this will as experienced by those who spoke in its name - a crisis grounded in the social isolation of the Activist intellectuals: their "free-floating" situation which confined them to the action of thought and the thought of action. Korsch's Fabianism, which centered around the idea of the will to socialism and what he called the *Geist der Tat* (spirit of action), was bound up with the prospects and problems of Activism. This was, moreover, the general framework within which Lukacs was working at the same time; one finds here the embryo of the parallel attempts nearly a decade later to develop a subjectivized and activized Marxism.

Mention of the ties between Korsch and Lukacs provokes mention of the tensions, which in this instance serve to introduce some of the particulars of Korsch's outlook during his Fabian period. In his approach to two issues of mutual concern - culture and intellectuals - we glimpse features which are quite at odds with the characteristic tendencies of Lukacs' work at the same time. To begin with, although Korsch was

interested in cultural questions, they were not his main focus; more importantly, the notion of a crisis of bourgeois culture as a whole was as foreign to his thinking as it was central to Lukacs'.

Writing in 1913 (from England), for example, Korsch analyzed a competition announced by a popular German weekly magazine offering a lucrative prize to the author of the best concluding chapter to an unsolved, serialized crime novel.<sup>17</sup> While viewing the contest as symptomatic of the decline in social and cultural values, he did not pursue this theme but characteristically pointed to the potentially positive role such competitions could play as a means of advancing solutions to real scientific and social problems. Specifically, he stressed their possible merits in financially assisting and bringing to public notice previously unknown intellectuals, referring by way of a model to the famous competition won by Jean-Jacques Rousseau at an earlier, more heroic stage of bourgeois society. Had such competitions remained meaningful, Korsch concluded, they would enable society to recognize the value of "free intellectual workers. In their present state, however, they are a sham. To win the money, many intelligent people will waste their time."<sup>18</sup>

"Intellectual workers:" Korsch did not elaborate on the term, which was in any case not confined to him at the time, but it is nevertheless suggestive of additional contrasts with Lukacs' approach. When the latter addressed the question of intellectuals, he focused by and large on aesthetically and philosophically creative individuals and their tragic fate in late bourgeois society: the category of "intellectual worker," while not incompatible with his early sociology of culture, did not loom large. Thus, while too much is often made of Lukacs' elitism, it is fair to say that his approach to the issue of intellectuals was less democratic than Korsch's - but probably more radical, as well.

In his 1913 essay, "The Advancement of the Intellectually Gifted," Korsch criticized both the English and German educational systems for their continued failure to develop programs capable not only of supporting and advancing the gifted students, but of doing so while democratizing schooling generally.<sup>19</sup> Along the same lines, he argued in "The Exam as a Political Problem" that those who claim exams are harmful to true talent overlook the ways in which creative exams can be a meaningful mechanism of insuring an equitable selection of intellectual talent.<sup>20</sup> In other words, Korsch's primary concern was with the specific, practical steps that could be taken to promote a democratic educational system and the broadest possible public dissemination of acquired scientific and cultural knowledge. This is some distance from Lukacs' preoccupation with what he called the "Tonio Kroger problem:" the split between artist and bourgeois within creative souls.<sup>21</sup>

Korsch's preoccupation with intellectual workers, education, public enlightenment and so on was motivated by the problems of his own historical situation as a socialist intellectual. And it is significant that in the pre-war years he found the most adequate answers to these problems in the Fabian Society and not in the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD). For this points to the fact that, with Lukacs and for related but quite different reasons, Korsch was a critic of the then official Marxism before he became a revolutionary Marxist. His side of this story is most clearly unfolded in the two politically most important essays of the London years, both published in 1912: "The Fabian Society" and "The Socialist Formula for the Organization of the Economy." <sup>22</sup>

Against what he deemed a fairly arid "German Marxism," Korsch spoke glowingly of the "Fabian touch" and fully shared its ideals: having overcome the "youthful anarchism" and "utopian hopes and wishes" of its early years in the 1880s, the Fabian Society's work, as he saw it, was now dominated by a "scientific spirit." Unlike the Germans who "tend to raise theory to an end in itself," the Fabians "unite the most serious theoretical requirements with an invincible inclination toward the simple and practical." Their "renowned sense of reality," their ability to show in each instance how theoretical insights are applicable to practical problems and, moreover, their ability to take direct, practical initiatives, was in Korsch's view the root of the Fabians' superiority to the German Social Democrats on the one hand, and on the other, to the academic socialists, the *Katheder Sozialisten*. Never losing sight of the links "between theoretical thought and practical action," Fabians are consistently able to "take the next step and come closer to their goal: democratic socialism, socialization of production and full democratic government."

The basic superiority of Fabian over "German Marxist" positions hinged, in Korsch's account, on the issue of determinism and (free) will. In light of the later development of his - and Lukacs' - thinking, the standpoint here is intriguing. On the one hand, Korsch noted that the Fabians share with German Marxism the conviction that "political and economic socialism... comes by itself [*von selber kommt*] whether or not we as individuals endorse or oppose its development." To this, however, the Fabians "add" a vital element not to be found in German Marxism: an "orientation of the will" (*Willensorientierung*), a "*Geist der Tat*." A vivid capsule summation of Korsch's Activism, and an equally vivid anticipation of his later reconstructions of Marxism, this argument shines forth in still another way: namely, as straightforward Kantianism in which an ethical (or noumenal) "ought" is added from outside to the empirical (or phenomenal) "is" which otherwise proceeds fully independently of subjective, human determinations. The separation of the subject and the matter of history is presupposed.

Hegel, who had theorized history as "subject-matter" and whom Lukacs was at this time - 1911-1912 - rediscovering, is nowhere to be found in Korsch's stand point. With many German intellectuals of the day he considered Kant the philosopher, although none of his early writings touch explicitly on philosophical questions - for the record, philosophy had been his "minor field" in the university.<sup>23</sup> Among other things, this marks the distance Korsch would have to travel to reach the argument of *Marxism and Philosophy* (1923), namely, that the separation of (Hegelian) philosophy from Marxism amounted to the cancellation of Marxism's revolutionary core. For in the pre-war years Korsch shared what the recent historian of Fabianism, A.M. McBriar, calls the Society's "avoidance of philosophy".<sup>24</sup> Moreover, Korsch seems fully to have shared the Fabians' positivistic conception of science as fact-gathering. Ultimately, he would never supersede this component of his early thinking; modify it, perhaps, but even during his Hegelian-Marxist period of the early to middle 1920s, he remained and would continue afterward to be an heir to the English utilitarian branch of the Enlightenment.

Meanwhile, the most concrete expressions of the Fabian Society's Activism were in Korsch's view its emphasis on positive, practical programs, and its conception of the agents of social change. "Negative" and "retarded" were the terms he applied to the "socialist idea of socialization" that had been presented by the German Marxists and the Second International as a whole: it offered little on the "positive side". In a passage which he would later, in the midst of the German Revolution of 1918, refer back to as a Cassandra-like prediction of the subsequent crisis of German socialism, he argued (in 1912) that: "the emptiness of the socialist formula [for socialization] is not damaging so long as the practical impact is confined to the struggle to alleviate existing conditions. It will become damaging, however, as soon as the moment arrives when socialism somewhere, somehow enters the government and is required to carry through the socialist organization of the economy. If this moment were to arrive somewhere today, socialists would be caught unprepared; socialism must admit that it has not yet found a comprehensive plan for the construction of a socialist economy." <sup>25</sup>

Prior to 1918, Korsch did not advance very far beyond this appeal. He did, however, refer, as did the Fabians generally, to the importance of models presented by Guild socialism and French syndicalist currents as vital counterweights to both "state socialist" ideas and to "false socialization of production" achieved by capitalism. And he called for a great "union of observation, experiment, theoretical study, fantasy, judgment... combined in a project that is entirely foreign to utopian subjectivism". Without "precise, positive programs," socialism, Korsch insisted, quoting Beatrice Webb, "will lose all influence on the intellectual youth. . . [and will be deemed] intellectually bankrupt by coming generations of thinkers and workers."



Thinkers and workers: in this connection Korsch noted that while the Fabian Society, unlike the SPD, is not a proletarian organization, the "English social movement" is nevertheless "conscious of itself in the Fabian Society," which prevents the broader movement from becoming a "mere wage movement" or a "mere collectivism." He had, in fact, entered the Society during the several years of its most extensive growth and impact on English public life, although the peak of its membership (1913) never exceeded 2,850. <sup>26</sup> For Korsch, this was not a negative but a positive sign of two essential features of Fabianism. First, he affirmed the fact that the Society rejected the political party model of organization, realizing that the "socialist form of state cannot be achieved by a political party, no matter how large." Instead, Korsch remarked enthusiastically, the Fabians conceive of themselves as a "*geistigen Zentrum*" (literally, a spiritual center), a center for the generation of socialist ideas, and follow the road of a "politics of penetration": education, scientific research, and the dissemination of knowledge. Secondly, regarding class composition, he greeted the fact that the Fabians' main constituency was composed of the "daily rising... new middle class... business, technical and industrial employees [*Beamten*], city and state employees, students, journalists... members of all the theoretical professions."

This is all fairly straightforward Fabianism, but with a certain 'Korschian touch'. Looking back on this from the vantage point of revolutionary ferment in 1919-1920, he specified what he considered the radical implications. In April 1919, for example, he noted that while socialism was a goal for a growing number of SPD members and an object of much scholarly study prior to the revolution, the fact was that "as a *Weltanschauung*, as a spiritual and psychological need and as a revolution of the heart - which means a revolution of the world - socialism was present among educated sections of Germany only within extremely confined... and isolated circles." <sup>27</sup> Or, as he would write a year later, "the few who had perceived the dangers in the tendency toward increasing passivity [in German socialism] for the most part stood outside the actual socialist movement and their insights were condemned to impotence". <sup>28</sup> Clearly, Korsch had himself and the Fabians in mind: they and not the German Marxists had upheld the active vision of socialism.

This retrospective self-analysis highlights a decisive dimension of Korsch's early work - its Activism - but overlooks several things which, in spite of the more than five inches of snow outside, call for comment. First, the whole question of the relationship between what we can call 'socialism from the bottom' (the struggle for control of production by the producers) and 'socialism from the top' (the socialist plan and planners) received only fragmentary interpretation from Korsch during the Fabian period. On the one hand, as noted above, he was sympathetic to Guild socialist and syndicalist ideas, and, moreover, was in instinctive solidarity with the idea that any

social movement must be self-governing; he was hostile to state socialist ideas, in addition. These components of his early thinking would blossom in 1919-1920 when Korsch emerged as a participant and leading theorist in the Workers' and Soldiers' Councils movement, which he initially understood as a realization of Fabian ideas of industrial democracy. On the other hand, during the Fabian period he had spoken (above) of the hypothetical moment at which "socialism enters the government and is required to carry through the socialist organization of the economy." Isolated from the working class movement, which was itself not revolutionary in any case, Korsch in the pre-war years tended to think of socialism as a 'top down' affair, even as this conflicted with other impulses in his thinking.

In this connection, the Fabian Society has recently been characterized as an organization of "bureaucratic collectivists before their time" who conceived themselves as the conscious vanguard of a new scientific-technocratic governing class.<sup>29</sup> Not entirely guilty of this charge, Korsch was also not entirely innocent, as signified by his view of the "new middle classes" of employees, civil service workers and "members of the theoretical and practical professions" as the key social agencies of socialist construction, and by his general emphasis on the important role of intellectuals as guides. He was more of a socialist democrat than the Fabian Society as a whole, however, and if he could not in the pre-war years grasp the industrial proletariat as the revolutionary 'subject,' this was not merely a reflection of his petty-bourgeois background: it was equally a reflection of the fact that the proletariat at the time was not proletarian. Stated differently and in Korsch's own words from 1920: the "spiritual foundation of the development of socialist knowledge and preparedness for action is... grounded in the knowledge of the real situation of the proletariat, just as before the war the proletariat, in one sense so close and visible, yet for the great majority of intellectuals almost non-existent, formed the dark underground of the rising wealth of Europe and America".<sup>30</sup>

If Korsch's silence on the managerialist implications of Fabianism is partially redeemed by the simultaneously democratic thrust of his own thinking, and by his option in 1919-1920 for a proletarian-democratic position, it should also be seen as a clue to a central ambiguity in his whole perspective, and as a foreshadowing of his turn to Leninist vanguardism in the mid-1920s. Does it need to be added that this ambiguity is hardly peculiar to Korsch? Meanwhile, he was also silent about other aspects of Fabianism which, we might charitably assume, he privately criticized: for example, the prevalent Fabian view of the moral and technical superiority of Western civilization on the basis of which many members endorsed British imperialism and war aims. Similarly, if he had reservations regarding the currents of mysticism and quackery that ran through the Fabians' "scientific spirit," he kept them out of print.

Indeed, his solidarity with the Society's "scientific spirit" is part of a broader aspect of Korsch's outlook which, moreover, is quite at odds with Lukacs': namely, his appreciation of what then and now is called English practicality or, in some circles, instrumentalism. As suggested earlier, his perspective here was partially a product of his disaffection with what he considered a Germanic tendency toward abstract theorizing; beyond that, it was a matter of Korsch's inner leaning toward the practical, the utilitarian, the next workable step within the given reality. If one wanted the single point upon which Korsch's and Lukacs' mental universes diverged most sharply, it would surely be this. In the pre-war period but later as well, Lukacs viewed Anglo-American practicality and efficiency (and "scientific spirit") as a crystallization of some of capitalism's most destructive elements. To look briefly ahead once again, it is significant that in the early 1920s Korsch would view the Taylorist principles of labor rationalization and industrial efficiency much as did Lenin, that is, as supposedly neutral techniques which could be creatively utilized in a socialist order. For Lukacs, Taylorism was the historically most extreme expression of the "reification" of labor.<sup>31</sup>

In this general connection, it is worth noting that in Hungary around 1906 Lukacs came into contact with the "Social Scientific Society" founded (1900) by Oskar Jaszi, and contributed articles to its journal, *Huszadik Szazad* (Twentieth Century). Positivistic, technocratic and reformist in outlook and program, the Social Scientific Society was distinctly and consciously analogous to the English Fabians. In 1904, for example, Jaszi and his colleagues launched a "Free School of the Social Sciences," an educational program for workers based on the premise that an educated proletariat was the precondition not only of modernization and socialism, but of avoiding violent revolution as well. Courses on natural science, hygiene, business law, history, Russian literature and the 'woman question' were among those offered.<sup>32</sup> Lukacs, however, emphatically did not share this perspective; for him, the Western road into the twentieth century was already a bad one and could not serve as a genuine solution to the problem of Hungary's backwardness. He published in *Huszadik Szazad* in part because it was one of the only available outlets and in part because the beleaguered intellectual opposition in Hungary was, in spite of many basic differences, something of a unified community.<sup>33</sup>

Nevertheless, on the strength of their Activism and their positive-practical approach to socialism, Korsch considered the Fabians the most advanced grouping of socialist thinkers and activists of the day. In the thick of the German Revolution of 1918 one of his first pronouncements was a call for the organization of a Fabian-type "*geistigen Zentrum*" in Germany; and between 1919 and 1920 he would use the term "Practical Socialism" (the title of an early Fabian newspaper) to define his newly found Marxism. He would, in this new period, break decisively with Fabian gradualism and

enter the revolutionary camp. Yet, the "Fabian touch" would continue to touch - and taint - his work.

### **The War Years: An Optimist in Despair**

In the summer of 1914 Korsch was recalled from England and inducted into the German army with the rank of second lieutenant - as a student he had completed his "maneuvers," the equivalent of reserve officer training. Because he did not hide his lack of enthusiasm for the imminent war and for the wave of nationalist fanaticism that swept Germany in the summer and fall of 1914, he was demoted to a corporal. Although he never carried a gun, Korsch saw active combat duty on the Western and Eastern fronts, was wounded seriously several times, and received numerous medals for bravery, including the Iron Cross. In 1917 he was again promoted to the rank of lieutenant, although throughout the war he lived in the barracks of the regular troops, not in the officers' quarters. From the outset he had defined himself as "*Razi, Pazi, Internazi*" the German diminutives for Rationalist, Pacifist, Internationalist.<sup>34</sup>

During the war he had little time for writing and the extent of his publications was three short articles in *Die Tat*, written during convalescence from wounds in 1917 and early 1918. He evidently followed all anti-war activity with great interest, particularly the Zimmerwald and Kienthal congresses. Yet, on the basis of his published writings it seems clear that, as in Lukacs' case, it was not the war itself nor the emergent revolutionary opposition to it that moved Korsch toward Marxism. Where some saw a phoenix beginning to rise from the ashes of war, Korsch saw mainly the ashes, and at close range. He defined the basic feature of the era as "the simple process of the rapid and immense increase of suffering in the world"; "our earlier ideas" regarding the prospect of putting an end to human misery within several generations were based on a "too optimistic evaluation of the state of the world."<sup>35</sup> In fact, he wrote, "many of us go even further than simply realizing that the work of emancipation will be longer, harder and more disillusioning than we had once believed: we experience with Dostoyevsky's inscrutable hero, Ivan Karamazov, the absolute irreparability of the suffering of each being, which means that even if the overcoming of suffering and a final harmony were realizable, this would in no way justify or make bearable the miserable reality of the present."<sup>36</sup>

Korsch's several war-time essays were moreover not primarily concerned with immediately practical matters, but with a search for new moral orientations. He appealed, for example, for revisions of the German "national idealism" and the idea of duty (*Pflichtenlehre*) which he believed had contributed much to the disastrous *Gemeinschaft* of militarism, imperialism and chauvinism.<sup>37</sup> As to hopes and possibilities, he did see glimmers in the youth and student movements, which he

exhorted to overcome at last their sectarian isolation. In particular, he called on the more advanced and "gifted" sections, whose primary concern had been with their own spiritual suffering, to connect themselves to the real material and spiritual suffering of the majority of German youth.<sup>38</sup>

The heart of his situation at the close of the war was summarized in a brief preface he wrote, probably in the late summer of 1918, to an article he had written in London in 1914 but which was being published in *Die Tat* four years later. The essay, "The Culture of Modern England," he noted, "has no more value. Too much has changed; we know much more; we ourselves have changed. It is now essential to know why we failed, what went wrong... and what we now want." And, he added, "a *Rückblick* [look back] at the past is more valuable than a premature *Zukunftschance* [glance into the future]".<sup>39</sup> In the months and years immediately following, however, the process of Korsch's own changes and the development of his conception of "what we now want" would themselves be transformed by revolutionary events. Plunging himself into the maelstrom, he would attempt to fuse *Rückblick* and *Zukunftschance* into a single activity. The moment he had dimly anticipated in 1912, in which socialism would be tossed up onto the immediate historical agenda, was about to arrive late in 1918. Like Lukacs at the same time, Korsch was on the verge of revolutionary Marxism, as was reality - or so it appeared.

## Notes

1. This contrast between Korsch and Lukacs parallels the differences between Bertolt Brecht and Lukacs. In this connection, see Eugene Lunn's fine discussion in "Marxism and Art in the Era of Stalin and Hitler: A Comparison of Brecht and Lukacs." *New German Critique* 3 (Fall 1974), esp. pp. 16-21. Biographical material on Korsch in English can be found in the following sources: Fred Halliday, "Karl Korsch: An Introduction," *Marxism and Philosophy*, trans. Fred Halliday (New York, 1970), pp. 7-26; Hedda Korsch, "Memories of Karl Korsch" [Interview by Fred Halliday], *New Left Review* 76 (November-December 1972), pp. 35-45; Paul Mattick, "The Marxism of Karl Korsch," *Survey* 53 (October 1964), pp. 86-97. In addition, I had the opportunity to interview Korsch's widow, Dr. Hedda Korsch, in April 1969. References to this interview are referred to below as "Interview with Hedda Korsch" and should not be confused with the interview published in *New Left Review*.
2. See among other works: Furio Cerutti, "Hegel, Lukacs and Korsch", published in this issue of *Telos*; Gian Enrico Rusconi, *La Buona Cantica della Società* (Bologna, 1968), passim; Giuseppe Vacca, *Lukacs O Korsch* (Bari, 1969), passim; and

- Mihaly Vajda. "Karl Korsch's *Marxism and Philosophy*" in Dick Howard and Karl E. Klare, eds., *The Unknown Dimension: European Marxism Since Lenin* (New York. 1972). pp. 131-146.
3. Brief sketches of Korsch's 'road to Marx' can be found in the essays by Halliday and Mattick cited above. More recent and far more substantial treatment is in Michael Buckmiller, "Marxismus als Realität. Zur Rekonstruktion der theoretischen und politischen Entwicklung Karl Korsch," in *Ueber Karl Korsch*, ed. Claudio Pozzoli (Frankfurt, 1975),
  4. In connection with the question of why Lukacs has had a relative monopoly of attention, it should be noted that this is at least partly due to his "incorrect" political decision to remain in the communist movement after 1926. Korsch's departure/expulsion from the Communist Party of Germany in that year has the merit, in our view, of having been the better choice - but not the most interesting one. In other words, for attracting attention, the sinner has it all over the saint.
  5. Lukacs was not a professor.
  6. The German title is *Die Beweislast beim qualifizierten Geständnis: Zugleich ein Beitrag Aut Rechts und Tat frage* (Bonn, 1911).
  7. Hedda Korsch Interview.
  8. Several essays by Hedda Korsch, attempting to formulate a communist position on early childhood education and related questions, can be found in the 1924 and 1925 volumes of *Die Internationale*, the theoretical organ of the Communist Party of Germany. Karl Korsch was its editor at that time. Later, during their emigration in the United States, Hedda Korsch taught education courses at Wheaton College in Massachusetts. While the theme cannot be pursued further here, we note that there seem to be connections between an underlying interest in education, especially at the earliest levels, and a certain type of politics. Not a few German so-called "ultra-lefts" had backgrounds and/or professional experience in childhood education, for example, Alice Rühle, the wife of Otto Rühle. In the 1940s and after, Karl Korsch and Hedda Korsch were associated with ultra-left or Council Communist groups. The basis for such connections is probably the idea of education for revolution as distinct from the idea of management of revolution.
  9. "Jugendbewegung und Jugend Politik," *Die Tat* IX: 12 (March, 1918), p. 1052. Although written near the end of the war, the article makes clear that it expressed views Korsch held in the pre-war years as well.
  10. Bertolt Brecht, "Ueber meinen Lehrer" (no date given) in Bertolt Brecht, *Gerammelte Werke*, Vol. 20 (Frankfurt, 1967), p. 65. This little essay partly expresses Brecht's great admiration for his teacher, Korsch. It is also filled with

not so felicitous projections onto Korsch of Brecht's own guilty conscience as an intellectual in the "workers' movement," as for example when he says "Korsch is only a guest at the house of the proletariat. His bags are packed and he is always ready to leave."

11. Hedda Korsch Interview.
12. Max Beer, cited in Peter Gay, *The Dilemma of Democratic Socialism: Eduard Bernstein's Challenge to Marx* (New York, 1962), pp. 107.108.
13. Ibid., p. 107.
14. The journal's full title was *Akademische Rundschau. Zeitschrift für das gesamte Hochschulwesen und die akademischen Berufstände*. Its editors were Wilhelm Baum and Friedrich Schulze.
15. Harry Pross, *Literatur und Politik. Geschichte und Programme der politisch-literarischen Zeitschriften im Deutschen Sprachgebiet seit 1870* (Freiburg, 1963), p. 95. On Diederichs and his cultural-political milieu, see also George L. Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology: Intellectual Origins of the Third Reich* (New York, 1964), pp. 52-63.
16. Theodor Lessing, "Philosophie als Tat" (1907) in his *Philosophie als Tat* (Göttingen, 1914), p. 3. In Germany, "Activism" emerged as a self-conscious tendency thanks to the efforts of its most vigorous protagonist, the essayist Kurt Hiller. His journal, *Das Ziel*, launched on the eve of the war, served as "Activism's" eclectic but lively organ. Korsch did not publish in it, interestingly enough, until 1924, by which time his own activism had taken a different turn. See Karl Korsch, "Der jünger Marx als aktivistischer Philosoph," *Geistiger Politik*: 5th volume of *Das Ziel Jahrbuch* (1924), pp. 41-45. On "Activism" see Wolfgang Rothe, ed., *Der Aktivismus, 1915-1920* (Munich, 1969), and especially the copious and judicious study by Lewis D. Wurgaft, *The Activist Movement: Cultural Politics in the German Left, 1914-1933* (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Harvard University, 1970).
17. "Das 1,000,000 Mark Preisausschreiben der Zeit im Bild" *Die Tat* 5:3 Oune, 1913), pp. 321-323.
18. Ibid.. p. 323.
19. "Das Problem 'Aussteigen geistig Begabten'" *Die Tat* 4:11 (February. 1913). pp. 611-613.
20. "Das Examen als politischer Problem," *Die Tat* 5:8 (November. 1913), pp. 770-782.
21. See Lukacs' remarks in his foreword to *Essays on Thomas Mann*. Trans. Stanley Mitchell (London. 1964). p. 10.

22. "Die Fabian Society," *Die Tat* 4:8 (November, 1912), pp. 422-427, and "Die sozialistische Formel für die Organisation der Volksgemeinschaft," *Die Tat* 4:9 (December, 1912), pp. 507 -509. In the discussion immediately following, all citations are to these two essays, unless otherwise noted.
23. Interview with Hedda Korsch.
24. A.M. McBriar, *Fabian Socialism and English Politics, 1884-1918* (Cambridge, England, 1962), p. 147.
25. "Die sozialistische Formel," p. 507. Emphasis added.
26. *Fabian Socialism*, op.cit., pp. 149-150.
27. "Ueber die Möglichkeiten einer sozialistischen Aufklärung Arbeit," *Die Tat* 11:1 (April, 1919, p. 67.
28. "Grundsätzliches Fiber Sozialisierung," *Die Tat* 11:12 (March, 1920), pp. 904-905.
29. George Lichtheim, *A Short History of Socialism* (New York, 1970), pp. 200-201. Interestingly enough, criticism of the Fabians on the ground that they projected a scientific intelligentsia as the governing elite of the future socialist society was leveled in the late 1880s by Friedrich Engels. Meanwhile, from about that time onward, militant syndicalists were presenting the same criticism of Marxism itself - for example, Wacław Machajski, Georges Sorel, Erwin Szabo, Robert Michels, and Hubert Lagardelle. Starting in the mid-1930s Korsch renewed and developed his early but superficial interest in syndicalism, although he never integrated this dimension into his thinking.
30. "Robert Wilbrandts: Sozialismus" *Die Tat* 11:10 (January, 1920), pp. 782-783. Emphasis added.
31. Lukacs' critique of Taylorism is in *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London, 1970), pp. 99. As far as I can tell, Korsch never commented directly on Taylorism at any length. However, he did indicate clear if indirect endorsement by way of his publication in 1921, as part of the "Practical Socialism Pamphlet Series" he directed, of the pamphlet by Kurt Lewin, *Sozialisierung des Taylor-systems: Eine Grundsätzliche Untersuchung zur Arbeits und Berufs-Psychologie*. The pamphlet understood itself to be a "demonstration of the usefulness of the notorious Taylor system for the whole community." Lewin, who later made a name for himself in this country as the founder of "field theory" in social psychology, also remained in contact with Korsch; the two collaborated, for example, on "Mathematical Constructs in Psychology and Sociology", *Journal of the Unified Sciences*, 9 (1939). I have not read this essay but understand it to be an attempt to formulate mathematical models for understanding class



consciousness. One hesitates to hang too much on this one hook, but the links between Korsch and Lewin in the early 1920s and in the later years are surely a sign of the continuous positivistic motif in Korsch's work, which was interrupted only in the slightest manner by *Marxism and Philosophy*. Meanwhile, Korsch's underlying sympathy for 'English practicality' during his Fabian years is visible in many of his essays, among them: "Die Sommer schule der Fabian Society," *Die Tat* 5:5 (August, 1913), pp. 501-504; "Vom englischen Zeitungswesen," *Die Tat* 5:5 (August, 1913), pp. 461-466; "Probleme und Aussichten englischen Universitäten Wicklung," *Die Tat* 6:2 (May, 1914), pp. 154-164. This aspect of Korsch's thinking should not be taken to mean blind enthusiasm, but a positive orientation which, for example, contrasts sharply with Lukacs' contemporaneous orientation toward the mental world of Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy and Russian mysticism. That Korsch was no mere admirer of English social life can be seen in his "John Galsworthy," *Die Tat* 5:9 (December, 1913), pp. 961-964, and in his impassioned defense of the suffragette martyrs, "Die ernste Märtyrerin für Frauenstimmrecht," *Die Tat* 5:4 (July, 1913), pp. 426-427.

32. For discussions of the opposition intellectual groups in pre-war Hungary and Lukacs' relations to them, see the following: Zoltan Horvath, *Die Jahrhundertwende in Ungar. Geschichte der zweiten Reformgeneration, 1896-1914* (Neuwied and Berlin, 1966); David Kettler, "Culture and Revolution: Lukacs in the Hungarian Revolution of 1918," *Telos* 10 (Winter 1971), pp. 35-92; Istvan Meszaros, *Lukacs' Concept of Dialectic* (London, 1972); and Tibor Siile, *Sozialdemokratie in Ungar. Zur Rolle der Intelligenz in der Arbeiterbewegung, 1899-1910* (Cologne and Graz, 1967), esp. pp. 19-24.
33. See Meszaros, *Lukacs' Concept of Dialectic*.
34. Interview with Hedda Korsch. As far as I know, this is the only place in Korsch's published writings where Dostoyevsky appears. Lukacs, who was immersed in Dostoyevsky during his connection with the Max Weber circle in Heidelberg prior to the war, placed the great Russian writer at the center of his own confrontation with despair during the war years, as can be seen in the well-known final pages of *Theory of the Novel*.
35. "Akademisch: Soziale Monatsschrift" *Die Tat* 9:11 (February, 1918), p. 974. Ostensibly a review of an issue of this university journal, Korsch used the occasion for reflections on the problems and prospects opened by the war's end.
36. "Akademisch: Soziale Monatsschrift," pp. 974-975.
37. "Gedankens Silber Menschlichkeit " [review of a just-published book with this title by Leopold von Wiese], *Die Tat* 9:5 (August, 1917), p. 462.

38. "Jugendbewegung und Jugend Politik," *Die Tat* 9:12 (March, 1918), p. 1054.
39. "Die Kultur des modernen England," *Die Tat* 10:11 (February, 1919), pp. 863-864.